

Rachel Laurin
August 11th 1961 – August 13th 2023

I was sad to hear of the recent passing of Rachel Laurin. A google search will tell you that she was a Canadian organist, composer and educator. This article isn't so much to give biographical information, which one can find online, as it is to give a small personal reflection.

I first came across Rachel Laurin's music as a competitor in the 2017 Northern Ireland International Organ Competition. The first-prize winner, Sebastian Heindl, played her *Étude Héroïque*, an impressive, colourful and technically difficult piece which finished his programme—what Carlo Curley would have referred to as a 'barn burner'. Incidentally this piece is now in the repertoire of many concert organists and is frequently heard at international organ competitions.

Fast forward to 2019 and Thomas Trotter commissioned a piece by Laurin to mark his 800th recital as Birmingham City Organist. This piece, the *Sweelinck Variations*, blew my mind. It was equally as breathtaking to watch as it was to listen to. It is a kaleidoscope of colour, invention and virtuosity. (There is a particularly exciting pedal variation). You can hear this piece on Trotter's album 'Symphony Hall Sorcery'. He does put it in programmes from time to time. It's well worth the outing to see it performed.

I thought that the *Sweelinck Variations* would be a great recital piece to add to my repertoire (if I could actually play it) and that it would make a good competition piece too. As this score was (and to my knowledge, still is) unpublished, I got in touch with Rachel directly via email to ask if it might be possible to get a score. She sent an email to say that sadly she couldn't send me the score of this piece at this time as she wanted to give Thomas Trotter a year or so of performance exclusivity. However she did send me through a score of her *Mr Mistoffelees Overture* (which was at the time unpublished and hadn't yet been premiered).

I was absolutely delighted with this and got to work immediately. It sets T.S. Eliot's poem (from 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats') to music. The poem is written out in the preface and excerpts of the text are written into the organ score. It is a fun and colourful piece and technically very challenging. It's exciting learning a new piece when there are no existing recordings but it can be frustrating (especially if it's a difficult piece) as you think to yourself 'is it worth the effort'. With this piece I could see immediately that it would be a worthwhile endeavour if I could get my fingers and feet round it. Fast forward a little and emerging from the pandemic I had it in mind that I would play this piece in recitals and in a competition too. I sent Rachel a few recordings and she was pleased with my playing. She was very encouraging and generous with her time and we corresponded a fair bit over this time. She was a cat-enthusiast and sent me a few pictures of her cat sitting on her scores. I performed this piece at the 2021 RCO/IAO competition and won joint second prize. She was pleased to hear that I had won something and sent me a signed copy of the piece, once it was published, with a kind personal message in it too. I would go on to play it in quite a few recitals, emerging from the pandemic, and it was well received by audiences. I also submitted a recording for my application to the 2023 Longwood Gardens Organ Competition, in which I was successful in getting through to compete in Philadelphia. There is a recording on YouTube of myself playing it and another recording of Alan Morrison, who gave the premiere.

One thing that I really like about her compositions is that lots of them are good recital pieces. I think that quite a few of them are quite audience friendly, being fun, colourful and exciting

to watch, but there is substance too. I particularly like her *Three Impressions on Kingsfold*, which you can see on YouTube performed by recent Proms recitalist Isabelle Demers (who has played and recorded many pieces by Rachel Laurin). Thomas Trotter also used a selection of her *Twelve Short Pieces* (of which there are a few sets), segmenting major works by Duruflé in a live recital from King's College Cambridge (which can still be viewed online).

She was a formidable performer too. There is a video on YouTube of her performing her Sonata No 1. (The video quality isn't brilliant but it's worth viewing.) It's an appealing piece and every movement is modelled on different well-known organ pieces. Speaking to the Canadian competitors at the Longwood Gardens Organ Competition it is also clear that she leaves a legacy as a generous organ teacher.

There are several pieces by Rachel Laurin which I still want to learn and I have no doubt that her music will live on for years to come. While some of her music is really extremely technically difficult, there are pieces which are technically easier. Lots of her music is published by Wayne Leupold Editions (and there is a difficulty guide to each piece too).

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